

ST. GREGORY PALAMAS IN RUSSIAN THOUGHT: SPIRITUAL PRACTICE VERSUS RATIONALITY

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1. The actuality of spiritual experience

In the moving reality of Post-Modern culture, which fills the latest sociological literature, and which is characterized by wide popularity of clip-art and internet surfing, there has appeared a kind of thinking, which is oriented on the endless shift of pictures and images. One key characteristic in this new thinking is that it does not consider as important a sense of personal self-identity; so there is a legitimate question about the internal principles of what constitutes a person in the Post-Modern era. On the one hand, it seems that our world offers a variety of strategies of choice and possibilities for the realization of individual preferences, yet on the other hand, a traditional form of self-awareness of the European individual, that is rooted in the Christian experience of feelings of sin and repentance, has been eliminated. The history of “I” (Ego), explicated in the West-European philosophy in Augustine's *Confessions*, who for the first time recognizes *libido* (sinfulness) as a kind of underground basis of Ego, through the Cartesian subjectivity (Cogito) to the psychoanalytic theory of personality, is transformed into the world of domination of things, where there is postulated a rigid system of social standardization. In pursuit of a higher level of consumption and in the desire to be successful and to live according to standards of prosperity established in the society of Post-Modernity, the human is constantly in a state of psychological stress and destruction concerning his own identity; moving in this way, he is subjected to the process of depersonalization. Strangely, medieval mystics remarked on facing similar issues thus: the intention to own the external things and the benefits of the outside world would never be adequate for the infinite nature of man, whereas the practice of monastic asceticism and mystical knowledge of God lit the path of attainment of positive spiritual

infinity. In the perspective of searching for new forms of identity and practice of "self-care", Post-Modern culture cultivates the strategy of transition of social boundaries and the limits of rationality. In this context, the actuality of the Christian religion and tradition of monastic spiritual experience consists precisely in the fact that they do not deny the mind and body, but they transform both of them in the process of deification (*θέωσις*). Thus, ascetic struggle is not against nature, but against the unnatural use of corporeality. The body itself is not forbidden, but its misuse, its abuses.

In the history of the twentieth century, the study of man acquired the character of an "anthropological disaster". It meant that the basic principles of European humanism were subjected to destruction, demonstrated in turn by their principal imperfection. In the writings of Russian theologians, the problem of human existence appeared as a task of spiritual activity and as an experience of living practice of the Christian faith. During the twentieth century, Russian theologians met with considerable and irreconcilable social and ideological contradictions; Archimandrite Ambrose (Alexey Aleksandrovich Pogodin; 1925-2004), Archbishop Basil (Vsevolod Alexandrovich Krivoshein; 1900-1985), Archimandrite Cyprian (Konstantin Eduardovich Kern; 1899-1960), Father Georges Florovsky (1893-1979), Vladimir Nikolaevich Lossky (1903-1958) and Archpriest John Meyendorff (1926-1992) tried to solve these contradictions and appealed to the heritage of Patristic tradition; in this way, they formed the spiritual and theological school of European thought called the Neo-Patristics, in the frames of which Neo-Palamism acquired a special place and importance.

Each of the named Russian theologians played a significant role in the development of Neo-Patristic and Neo-Palamism studies. For example, Archimandrite Ambrose (Pogodin) translated from the Greek the *Homilies* of St. Gregory Palamas. Unfortunately, for sixty to eighty years in the twentieth century this translation could not be published in Russia, so it was published in Canada. Archbishop Basil (Krivoshein) was a monk of Athos and lived on Holy Mount Athos for twenty years. In September 1947, he was falsely accused of pro-Soviet sentiments (it was during the Civil War in Greece) and was forced to leave Athos. He was temporarily arrested and, after his release, he moved to Athens in May 1950; finally, he went to Oxford in February 1951. There he was a priest, and then a bishop, but he never ceased to feel that he was an Athonite monk. In November 1959, he participated in the celebration of the 600th anniversary of the death of St. Gregory Palamas in Thessaloniki, and in September 1963 he also took part in the celebration of the millennium of Mount Athos in Venice. However, Bishop Basil could get opportunity to visit the Holy

Mount again only in 1976. With tears in his eyes he entered the territory of the Holy Mount, which was forced to leave 29 years ago. His systematic study "Ascetic and Theological Teaching of St. Gregory Palamas", published in Prague in 1936, became a classic work. Later his studies of Symeon the New Theologian and other Fathers of the Church made him one of the main scholars in the Neo-Patristic school. Archimandrite Cyprian wrote his doctoral thesis on the anthropology of St. Gregory Palamas in the difficult years of the Second World War. It should be noted that Jean-Paul Sartre published his major metaphysical treatise "Being and Nothingness" in 1943, but the thrust of his ideas was fundamentally different. Father Georges Florovsky worked in Paris and in the Universities of the United States; he has acquired recognition not only thanks to his works dedicated to the Patristic tradition of Orthodox theology, but also thanks to the fundamental works on the history of Russian Church. Vladimir Lossky, a theologian of the Paris School, was one of the founders of the Neo-Patristic studies in Orthodox theology. He was a son of the famous Russian philosopher Nikolai Lossky, a professor of St. Petersburg University. In 1922, the family of Lossky was deported from Russia. Vladimir studied at the Sorbonne; during the Second World War, he was involved in the French Resistance. He taught dogmatic theology and Church history at the Institute of St. Dionysius in Paris. Publications of Archpriest John Meyendorff devoted to the Byzantine Patristic tradition and St. Gregory Palamas are well-known internationally (Sidorov, 1996); (Smolenkov, 2010).

Archimandrite Cyprian emphasizes that St. Gregory Palamas developed a highly intellectual theory of man (Archimandrite Cyprian (Kern), 1996, p.315). According to Palamas, the human body is not filled with sin, as the different Manichaean preachers argued, but the body intertwines with the soul of man that reflects the image and likeness of God. Thus, a human being cannot have only a spiritual existence, neither merely a physical nature; man has both. Moreover, he has a body, soul and spirit; so he cannot be reduced to the status of a social phenomenon that was characteristic of the Communist project. However, the possession of a body gives man the possibility of such a relationship with God, which is not available to angels, because the person feels and perceives, which is of fundamental importance for the mystical practice that involves real sensory experiences. In addition, a human person has unique opportunity to make new forms, though not in an absolute sense as God-Creator, but this ability also separates the nature of man from the angels.

2. Theology and philosophy

The interrelation between theology and philosophy is one of the major problems in the history of Medieval Christian thought, but this topic is quite relevant today. However, the main trends of contemporary philosophical discourse are not at all connected with theological understanding. In this context, it should be noted that modern philosophical investigations are out of the limits of theology. Positions of theology and philosophy look like two parallel lines, which never coincide. Philosophical studies do not allow the understanding of theological truths, because philosophy stops when dogma starts, while theology implies knowledge of philosophy. Examples are the Cappadocians, St. Basil the Great, and St. Gregory the Theologian, who got a philosophical education in Athens. In addition, there are St Gregory Palamas' studies while at Constantinople; a key point in these studies is his demonstration of his philosophical expertise at the palace of the Emperor. In this way, it is especially important that theology does not deny the possibility of logic and philosophy as an experience of searching within human reason; this sometimes can be a particularly painful process. Even though theology needs to engage with logic and philosophy in some way, it is a radically different way of thinking, because it is based on the authority of the tradition of the Church and its timeless dogmatic postulates of faith; on the other hand, philosophy is founded on the freedom of the human mind. Man encounters certain situations and tries to understand the world around him. It is not possible to go out of the limits of time. Philosophy has its own time-related limitations and so the foundations of philosophy cannot be explicated to the ultimate point.

The very interesting example of the joining of faith and reason can be found in the history of Russian philosophy, esp. in the teaching of the Slavophiles (Ivan Vasilyevich Kireyevsky and Aleksey Stepanovich Khomyakov). They were secular philosophers and influenced by the ideas of Schelling with whom they were personally acquainted. They raised the question of the priority of faith over the mind, but not denying reason itself, as in the doctrine of Kierkegaard (Either/or), demonstrating that faith is higher than the mind, and so it must include reason. The Slavophiles, being secular scholars, were among the first Russian intellectuals to pay attention to the heritage of the Holy Fathers; they actively cooperated with the Optina Elders, monks of the famous Russian monastery (the Optina Hermitage). According to their doctrine, faith comes from the heart, and not from abstract and "cold" human reason. Faith warms the soul; it gives the person an inner psychological force, the

vital energy. In this sense, the truth of faith is much more significant for a man than all kinds of logical principles and the rational theories describing the structure of the world in different ways. Faith is a deeply personal experience that cannot be rationalized and explicated completely. This is the unique experience of the heart, which includes the mind, soul, spirit and sensory experiences of body (emotions).

3. The teaching of St. Gregory Palamas in the Russian émigré theology of twentieth century

Firstly, it should be noted that there are certain dissonances in the estimates of Palamism between the Russian theologians during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, the teaching of Palamas caused critical (sometimes rather negative) comments that in turn were reflections of the influence of Catholic theology and works published at that time in the West. In the twentieth century, the situation radically changed. Russian theologians highlighted the importance of the work of St. Gregory Palamas.

Unfortunately, the Russian scholars lived and worked most parts of their lives abroad. They were immigrants, and moreover they were deprived of the very opportunity to visit their motherland. Their lives were the destinies of disadvantaged people, who survived the dramatic transformations of Russia and the world during the twentieth century. However, in spite of the experience of persecution and exile, which of course remained in their minds, they were able to find inner spiritual forces to survive in European and world culture. Apparently, in this context they better understood some fundamental aspects of Christian Orthodox theology. The studies of Patristic heritage and the theology of St. Gregory Palamas were for them not simply the way of abstract theoretical investigations, but a real experience of living activity.

It is noteworthy that the era of St. Gregory Palamas was the eve of the collapse of the Byzantine Empire. In such circumstances, Palamas defends the possibility of a living sense of faith and knowledge of God in the monastic practice. The Russian theologians lived through the collapse of the Russian Empire. In these tragic circumstances, they turned to the Christian humanism of Patristic heritage and the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas. In a certain sense, their works defined the basis of the spiritual revival of Orthodoxy. They demonstrated the continuity of the tradition of the Orthodox Patristic theology. In this regard, they emphasized the continuity of Palamas teachings with the theology of Holy Fathers. So, Vladimir Lossky named the doctrine of Palamas a kind of theological

“synthesis” of Orthodoxy (Lossky, 1972, pp.195-203). Russian theologians considered the work of St Gregory Palamas as a summation of Orthodox Theology during the Byzantine period (Meyendorff, 2003, pp.299-316). Archbishop Basil noted that the mystical texts of Symeon the New Theologian, as well as the Corpus Areopagiticum and works of Maximus the Confessor, played a significant role in the formation of ideas and teaching of Palamas. Father Georges Florovsky describes the work of Palamas as “following the Holy Fathers” (Florovsky, 1987). According to his understanding, it means above all an appeal to the testimony of the Saints, to the living perception of the heritage of Byzantine theology, the important part of which is the works of St. Gregory Palamas. For Florovsky, it is not only the past but it is the living practice of Orthodox faith. Russian scholars believed that the doctrine of Palamas about the Divine energy and the light of Tabor undoubtedly reflected the tradition of Patristic theology. Thus, Orthodox spirituality continued to live and develop in the difficult times of the political decline of the Byzantine Empire. Palamism was in a sense a spiritual response to the situation. Moreover, while the West-European culture of the Renaissance appealed to the earthly powers of man and intended to build a *regnum hominum*, the mystical teaching of Palamas, which had appeared a century or so before in the Orthodox East, aimed at a living experience of God. Archimandrite Cyprian says that the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries, known in the West as the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern time, or as the Renaissance, are associated not only with the creative works of Dante and the Italian humanists, but in the sphere of a spirituality with the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart and St. Gregory Palamas. The Theme of man and his possibilities and ways of living communion with God, the cognition of God in the mystical practices are the key questions for those thinkers (Archimandrite Cyprian (Kern), 1996, p.42). In the tragic times of the twentieth century, Russian theologians encouraged the Christian world to turn to the teaching of Palamas. This turning demonstrated the power of a living sense of faith. Moreover, it was also presented in Russia, not only in the sphere of theological reflections, but primarily in the experience of thousands of ordinary Orthodox priests, who died for the faith during Soviet times, especially in the period of mass persecutions during the 20's-30's. They died with humility, with thanksgiving to God the Creator for the opportunity to die for the Christian faith.

Russian theologians noted that the parallelism between Neo-Scholasticism and Neo-Patristic Theology and, accordingly, between Neo-Thomism and Neo-Palamism is not fully correct. The Orthodox doctrine

of Palamas is a mystical experience of God-vision and climbing to the Heavenly (in this context it is symbolically that the dying words of St. Gregory were: "To the Heavenly ... To the Heavenly ... To the Light ..."). This mystical experience however, does not deny the mind and senses, but it involves the higher measurement of human spirit. The contrary, the most parts of the teaching of Thomas Aquinas is a strategy for the regulation of human behavior based on Aristotelian ethics. In Thomas Aquinas' opinion, the correct human activity is determined by logic and reasonable principles. In Orthodox mysticism, the center of spiritual experiences is the heart. This monastic practice involves not only deep inner feelings and emotions, but also corporeal transformation. All researchers agree that the practice of mental prayer does not deny the body but opens up the prospect of its transformation, its deification (θέωσις). The first systematic description of the technology of inner prayer, as Vladimir Lossky argues, belongs to St. Symeon the New Theologian (Lossky, 1972, p.190).

The practice of "mental prayer" is not the art of combinations of logical-deductive propositions that are based on a scholastic understanding of theology as *ars demonstrativa*, but it is a real experience of silence, a deep inner experience of grace and Divine Light, a quiet and intimate process of the concentration of mind in its own depths, the feeling of joyful sadness. This practice could not be a part of noisy discussions of students in the Universities; it was inherent in the monastic tradition of Holy Mount Athos and the Russian elders. The rational laws and logic procedures cannot be used in this supra-mental experience. So, if the trend of Scholasticism is aimed on the formal-logical reconciliation that is based only on the principles of reason, then Palamism recognizes a real antinomy, which can be overcome only in a living experience of spiritual knowledge of God. However, first of all, it is, as Archbishop Basil explained, the real practice of continuous prayer, coupled with appropriate corporeal procedures (the rhythm of breathing, tilt of the head, etc.) and the absolute concentration of attention on the heart, which is the center of all spiritual activity (Hieromonk Basil, 1952). In this regard, Archbishop Basil emphasizes the basic priorities: a contemplative life, a real spiritual working and strict asceticism. Such kind of spiritual activity is able to open a special vision, which is inherent in "the eye of the heart". Since nothing can give any guarantee from possible passions and sinful temptations, so the movement towards purity of heart requires continuous efforts of repentance, humility and prayer. According to Archbishop Basil, this is the main fundamental difference between the mystical theology of St. Gregory Palamas that it is based on the personal spiritual experience and the "ontological" theology of Thomas Aquinas in which the main

principle is the idea of “analogy of being”. Each of them proposed their own way. The first way is a transformation of human nature (deification); the second way is a strategy of living in this world, but the one without the other cannot exist, just like monks praying not only for themselves but also for all the world and ordinary people (Archbishop Basil (Krivoshein), 1936).

In general, following Archbishop Basil, theological differentiation between the Catholic West and the Orthodox East is determined by the predominance of *kataphatic* or *apophatic* approaches (Archbishop Basil (Krivoshein), 1936). The positive (*kataphatic*) approach is inherent in Thomism. His doctrine is determined by the concept of the act of being: all the properties and perfections of created being are explained on the basis of the principle of analogy and by logical laws, so the logic became in the Thomistic doctrine a kind of universal ontology, which includes God Himself. The second negative (*apophatic*) approach prevailed in the Orthodox mystics. It means that any ontological or logical definitions and propositions cannot be applied to God for He is the Creator and is above all being, so it is not possible to use any logical procedures of our thinking and in the created world to describe Him, because God cannot be measured by the laws of formal logic and characteristics of the human mind. Hence the knowledge of God via the apophatic way has the character of antinomy. Antinomism is not only the core of the basic Christian doctrines, but also the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas on the God’s “essence” and “energy”. According to Vladimir Lossky, the antinomism of Palamas was close to the doctrine of German philosopher Nicholas of Cusa with his idea of *coincidentia oppositorum* (Lossky, 2013). However, Lossky points out that Western theology does not understand the difference between Divine essence and Divine energy (*ibid*). The Western theologians recognize characteristics in the very essence of God that are not possible for Orthodox theologians: not through senses, nor through speculation nor in any other way. For the Orthodox, only the characteristics of Divine Energy can be directly known through a special God-vision.

This experience of God-vision is characterized by a special insight and perception of the true Light. Russian theologians noted that this Divine light cannot be expressed by the ordinary human language because it does not correlate with the created world; it has an immaterial nature. Perception of the radiance of this uncreated Light is not merely the experience of rational cognition, a kind of enlightenment of the mind. It is available only for those whose hearts were cleansed. It is associated with the transformation of the whole human nature. Archimandrite Cyprian

writes: “the light of Tabor for the Hesychast is the uncreated Energy of God that is distinct from His essence; energy, thanks to which the knowledge of God and communion with God are possible experientially and existentially. This is the holy ... “cloud” of God, the “cognition through ignorance”, the words that resound in the reverential peace and quietly flowing into the heart of mental prayer...” (Archimandrite Cyprian (Kern), 1996, p.291). The Russian scholar stresses that the light of Tabor demonstrates the perspective of the Kingdom of Heaven. For St. Gregory Palamas, it is an event of special honor, which was awarded to the nature of man. To earn this honour, people are required to follow certain ascetic actions to improve on their own inner man. We are potentially (δυνάμει) adopted by God, but our problem is that we have to actively aspire (ενεργεία) to reach this state.

Conclusion

Thus, the Russian theologians argue that St. Gregory Palamas expressed and justified the authenticity and validity of the traditional concept of the Orthodox Church on the uncreated Divine Revelation in the created world. Through the development and refinement of the theological doctrine of the uncreated energies of God and the Divine Light, he demonstrated the reality of mystical communion with God. This mystical communion opened the possibility for a man, in spite of his creaturely limitations, through Grace of God, and without any pantheistic mergers and acquisitions of his Divine Being, to overcome all limitations and unite with God.

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